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ABSTRACT

Artificial criteria included in speech evaluation forms in the basic communication classroom to assess students' communication competencies fail to reflect what is known about communication as a transaction and about communication competence. Communication competence is most commonly defined from the action perspective which focuses on the performance of specific communication skills. The reaction approach focuses on the perceptions of the listener who makes the ultimate judgment of competence. Whether viewed as a property of the speaker or a characteristic of the listener, the action and reaction approaches lead to inappropriate and/or incomplete criteria for evaluating competence. The transactional approach, however, changes the focus to the creation of shared meaning. If communication is transactional, then communication competence is also mutually created. S. Morreale's "Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form" is an assessment instrument designed to evaluate/rate observable public speaking skills/behaviors of college students and consists of eight competencies. Criticisms of the evaluation form include: the discriminations needed to determine the levels of competence are not clearly defined; the competencies are based on generalizations from the teacher's point of view to the audience as a whole; and the competencies are culturally narrow. Communication teachers should not proclaim a student competent or incompetent based on a few weeks of lessons and a limited number of performances in an artificial environment. (Contains 40 references.) (RS)

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COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE: A REACTION TO THE "COMPETENT SPEAKER SPEECH EVALUATION FORM"

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COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE: A REACTION TO THE "COMPETENT SPEAKER SPEECH EVALUATION FORM"

During the 1992 SCA Convention, the "Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form" was distributed to participants during a Short Course (Morreale, et al., 1992). Other evaluation forms such as the CAAI form (Rubin, 1982; 1985) reflect ongoing efforts to define and measure communication competence. Morreale, et al. (1992) conclude that "communication competence has become the significant referent with respect to the goal of communication instruction" (p. 23). Indeed, most assessments of basic communication courses include evaluating students' communication competence as a measure of course effectiveness. The problem with all this is the belief that we can teach communication competence in one course. Perhaps even a more basic problem is the assumption held that taking a communication course can render students "competent". However, the centrality of the competence construct in current pedagogical practices and course design is undeniable.

Scholars seem to be in considerable disagreement concerning the definition of competence, its theoretical foundations, its behavioral manifestations, and its measurement. For example, some definitions focus on knowledge as the essential requirement for competence (McCroskey, 1982). Few scholars dispute the obvious connection between knowing what to do and communication competence. Other scholars require the performance of communication skills (Bochner and Kelly, 1974; Buerkel-Rothfuss, Gray, and Yerby, 1993). Pavitt and Haight (1986), Duran (1983), and others require competent communicators to be able to adapt to differing social constraints and meet other's expectations. No one suggests the strong connection between communication skills and communication competence. The importance here is not to confuse the means, communication skills, with the end, communication competence. Some scholars suggest that competent communicators must be able to formalize and achieve communication goals (Wiemann, 1977). Attaining goals is important for all participants in a communication transaction. We cannot fall into the trap of emphasizing speaker skills over listener skills,

or visa versa. Most writers combine one or more of these criteria (Rubin 1982; Spitzberg, 1983; Rosenfeld and Berko, 1990).

The different conceptualizations of competence have resulted in a conceptual quagmire which is neither enlightening nor pragmatically useful. Phillips suggests that "Defining 'competence' is like trying to climb a greased pole. Every time you think you have it, it slips" (p. 25). Rubin and Henzl (1984) argue, "Teachers and researchers alike have found the literature [on communication competence] confusing since these varying perspectives are often treated as definitive statements on competence rather than the perspectives they are" (p. 263). Defining and measuring competence first requires an analysis of the validity of the underlying perspectives. We argue that the transactional approach to communication obviates the current definitions of competence and its measurement.

Finally, little is known about how to put all of these, or for that matter any of these, depictions of communication competence to use on any given campus. Spitzberg (1983) suggested that "while our discipline begins to develop instructional objectives for communication competency, it is important that our perspective of competence be precise enough to generate research and interdisciplinary respectability, and simultaneously broad enough to integrate diverse educational concerns" (p. 323). The utility of our depictions of communication competence must be both useful and rooted in our history. Isolating the focus on speaker skills or listener skills seemingly misses the importance of communication -- mutual or simultaneous understanding.

Action and Reaction Approaches to Communication Competence

Competence is most commonly defined from the action perspective which focuses on the performance of specific communication skills. For example, McCroskey (1982) states that many

definitions of competence require performance of communication skills. "Clearly, having the ability to behave in the appropriate manner is not sufficient to be judged competent, the ability must be manifest behaviorally.. . . To be judged competent, in other words, the person must perform competent behaviors" (p. 2). The performance of skills by one person are evaluatively placed along a continuum of competence (Rosenfeld and Berko, 1990; Spitzberg, 1983). The more skillfully the message is encoded or decoded, the more competent the communicator. Competent communicators are those who can skillfully construct and deliver a message which is appropriate to the context and listener, or who can effectively listen and decipher a message. In this scenario, both communicators can be labeled as "competent" yet the communication exchange not be competent.

The reaction approach focuses on the perceptions of the listener who makes the ultimate judgment of competence. Competence is determined by whether or not the listener perceives the speaker to be competent. For example, Rubin (1985) states "One goal of the communication scholar is to understand how impressions about communication competence are formed, and to determine how knowledge, skill, and motivation lead to perceptions of competence in various context" (p. 173). Similarly, Pavitt and Haight (1985) suggest that competence is a template by which receivers judge the appropriateness of other people's communication behaviors.

Whether viewed as a property of the speaker or a characteristic of the listener, the action and reaction approaches lead to inappropriate and/or incomplete criteria for evaluating competence. Focusing on only one element of the communication context in isolation provides a distorted picture of the complexities of communication. Separation of competence into either communicator's separate behaviors suggests that one person's behavior can be judged apart from another person's reaction. These approaches lead to three common, but problematic, methods for assessing competence: as skills, as goal attainment, and as appropriateness.

Competence as Communication Skills

The action approach, for example, suggests that competence can be determined by measuring the person's performance of specific effective communicative skills. Such assessment necessarily assumes that an ideal model of competent skills exists. Competence becomes a judgment of the closeness of fit between a person's behavioral performance and that ideal model of communication behavior. Rubin (1991) describes the measurement of competence as when "an individual [student] communicates while being rated on standard criteria by either a trained observer or a participant. These techniques are based on a communication skills approach to competence both theoretically and operationally" (p. 304). (See the appendices for examples of this approach.] The difficulty is in determining an appropriate model that can be universally applied beyond the specific communicative event. Even in the public speaking classroom, criteria and level of competence change from assignment to assignment, from first speech to last, from beginning classes to advanced. The same performance of communicative behaviors judged as competent for one assignment in one class are evaluated as less competent for another class or assignment. Behavior judged as competent in the classroom may be judged as incompetent elsewhere.

The problems here should be obvious. Competence must be viewed as more than just the application of skills. We have to view competence as a shared creation among participants; therefore skills and their application will change repeatedly during an exchange. We cannot teach that these are the skills and they will make you competent in all situations. Can we say we do avoid this temptation?

The notion that competence is context specific (Bochner and Kelly, 1974; Spitzberg, 1983) inherently implies that different behaviors are required by different contexts. Thus, assessment of competence would require an analysis of the specific context (Spitzberg, 1991; Spitzberg and Brunner, 1991). It would also assume that different ideal models would be applicable to different contexts, such that learning one model would be insufficient to create generalized competence. Rubin (1991) concludes, "we must examine the impact of the context on communication behavior" (p. 305). Hence, Morreale,

et al. (1992) conclude, "Given the impracticality of developing a single instrument to assess communication competence, the focus must be on developing multiple instruments or procedures for assessing competence within specific contexts" (p. 27). Because contexts are infinitely variable, accurate competence assessment becomes problematic; yet teachers make these assessments daily.

In discussing communication competence as skills, Rubin (1991) suggests, "The communication skills movement, because of its focus on skill enhancement through instruction, provides instructional guidelines for each of the many skills comprising competence. Some have argued that these skills are much too specific and that the whole impression is more than the sum of the parts" (p. 295). Therefore, the skills approach may actually limit our abilities to teach **and** research communication competence.

Competence as Goal Achievement

From the action approach, competence can also be viewed in terms of "effectiveness" or achievement of goals. Although goals appear inherently measurable, they are not. In many cases goals are ill-defined, nebulous constructs. Communicators cannot judge whether goals were attained because the goals are unknown. In other cases, goals change over time (Rosenfeld & Berko, 1990). The goals formulated prior to interaction are not necessarily the same goals created during the actual communication, or the goals realized during retrospective sense making. In most cases, multiple goals operate simultaneously to guide communicator behaviors. These goals include content and relationship objectives, short-term and long-term outcomes, and goals for self and others. Indeed, the communication goal may be to intentionally confuse the other, that is, to intentionally communicate ineffectively.

When some goals are met and not others, when short-term goals are achieved while long-term goals are not (and vice versa) or when personal goals are met while others' goals are thwarted, determining the level of competence is problematic. Similarly, communication goals cannot be ascertained by simply observing communicators' behaviors. For example, many persuasive messages

achieve their effects only after time has passed (the sleeper effect) or upon repetition of messages. Conversely, competence cannot be inferred simply by measuring goal attainment. Goals are often achieved due to factors totally unrelated to the communicators' efforts such as chance, historical events, other people's communication, or changes in the receiver's experiences. Defining competence as the achievement of goals provides little constructive help in determining communication competence.

Competence as Appropriateness

The reaction view suggests that competence is judged by the receiver of the message. Regardless of the intent of the speaker, or the speaker's own assessment of communication competency, the receiver ultimately determines the effectiveness of the message. Even action definitions of competence which require "adaptation to the listener" imply that the listener is the judge of speaker's ability to adapt. Just as skills are context specific, so must assessments of appropriateness. While "Valley talk" and vocalized pauses may be abhorred in the classroom and other formal situations, they are the accepted norm and required in some contexts. Direct and frequent eye contact may be appropriate for the Westernized speech classroom, it would be counterproductive in many Oriental and Native American interactions.

While, theoretically, skill performance and goal attainment may be observable phenomena, appropriateness is inherently a judgment, an inference made from a behavior or a lack of behavior. From this perspective, competence becomes an art of rhetorical criticism rather than a empirical observation of communication behavior (Phillips, 1983). Rubin (1991) summarizes the appropriateness view of communication competence. She states, "Various communication theories see appropriateness as central to communication competence. ... Appropriate behaviors are those that others judge to be consistent with the rules of a particular society. ... Competence, then is knowledge of appropriate rules and the skill to accomplish goals while using these rules with others" (p. 297). From the reaction approach, assessment of competence changes depending on the specific person evaluating it and that person's critical, analytical

abilities. Measuring competence, therefore, depends on determining which person's judgment is valid. The appropriateness criteria places competence in the receiver's skills, knowledge, and acumen rather than on the speaker's communicative ability.

A Transactional Approach to Competence

Most basic communication textbooks and communication scholars accede that communication is a transactional process, that is, communication involves the simultaneous sending and receiving of messages by all communication interactants. The transaction approach, however, is more than simultaneity of message exchange. It implies that people mutually create communication through their joint behaviors. The approach changes the focus of communication from the message (action) and subsequent feedback (reaction) to the creation of shared meaning. Meanings for extant communicative behaviors is derived from the communicators' private experiences, emotional and physiological states, and perceptual constraints as modified by the social and physical contexts. Communication, therefore, is a mutually created, non-linear, socially constructed event among interdependent interactants.

If communication is transactional then communication competence is also mutually created (Yoder, et al., 1993). Competence is not a judgment about what a speaker OR a listener does in isolation, but what both people simultaneously and mutually create. For example, a good listener can compensate for a poorly constructed message or can help the other person clarify their message. Conversely, a message which meets all a priori requirements of an ideal speech may be negated by a receiver's inadequate listening skills or perceptual biases. Similarly, a person can construct a message which overcomes listening barriers. Relational partners may implicitly understand messages which are indecipherable to anyone outside the relationship.

In each of these cases, mutual understanding was created but it is impossible to assess that one

person alone is a competent communicator. Rather, the assessment must be on whether the communication is more or less competent. If people develop mutual agreement on the meaning of their communication, the communication was competent regardless of the adequacy of the individual communicators' skills. If people cannot or do not create shared meaning, then it seems contradictory to suggest either was a competent communicator.

Implications for the Basic Communication Course

We have argued that most definitions and measurements of communication competence are based on the action or reaction approaches to communication. Assessing the adequacy of communication behaviors apart from the context and relationship of the participants is at best arbitrary and inherently biased. Determining an ideal model by which to compare individuals' performances of communication skills is counterproductive since no model can generalize to all communication contexts and development of models for each context becomes infinitely complex. Measuring goal achievement as an indicator of competent communication requires an unwarranted assumption that goals can be reliably and validly defined and that a person's communication behavior was a sufficient and necessary cause of the actual outcome. Yet measuring instruments based on the action and reaction approaches continue to be developed.

Indeed, communication competence may not even be observable to an outside viewer. One reason for this is that judgments about communication competence (from the transactional approach) are dependent upon the shared histories **and** the relationship of the communicators. For an outside observer to judge communication competence in a long term relationship would be as difficult for someone to assess communication competence in a newly-formed relationship. In addition, participants may alter their judgments of communication competence over time. That is, with additional information about their

communication, participants may retroactively adjust their judgments of competence from a particular situation.

The Competent Speaker Form

Morreale, et al. (1992) state, "**The Competent Speaker** speech evaluation form is an assessment instrument designed to evaluate/rate observable public speaking skills/behaviors of college students. . . . The instrument can be used to evaluate skills/behaviors as opposed to knowledge or motivation. It assesses both verbal and nonverbal behavior and remote preparation skills" (p. 3). The **Competent Speaker Form** consists of eight competencies, four related to delivery and four related to speech preparation.

The eight competencies identified are (Morreale, et al., 1992, pp. 8-15):

COMPETENCY 1: Chooses and Narrows a Topic Appropriately for the Audience and Occasion.

COMPETENCY 2: Communicates the Thesis/Specific Purpose in a manner Appropriate for the Audience and Occasion.

COMPETENCY 3: Provides Supporting Material Appropriate to the Audience and Occasion.

COMPETENCY 4: Uses an Organizational Pattern Appropriate to the Topic, Audience, Occasion, and Purpose.

COMPETENCY 5: Uses Language Appropriate to the Audience and Occasion.

COMPETENCY 6: Uses Vocal Variety in Rate, Pitch, and Intensity (Volume) to Heighten and Maintain Interest Appropriate to the Audience and Occasion.

COMPETENCY 7: Uses Pronunciation, Grammar, and Articulation Appropriate to the Audience and Occasion.

COMPETENCY 8: Uses Physical Behaviors That Support the Verbal Message.

Criticism of the Form. We have three general criticisms of **The Competent Speaker** evaluation form. These include: (1) the ability to discriminate the levels of competence, (2) the generalizations from the teacher's point of view to the audience as a whole, and (3) the cultural narrowness of the competencies. Many of these criticisms are also appropriate to the speech evaluation sheets included in the appendices.

First, the discriminations needed to determine "above average," "high," "very high," "appropriate," and "exceptional" levels of competence are not clearly defined or adequately defended. These discriminations call for subjective judgments of quality of "ideal" behaviors as opposed to relational dimensions which impact understanding and the degree of communication competence achieved. The differences between these gradations are vague and not universally accepted. For example, Morreale, et al. (1992) suggest it is important a speaker demonstrate "insightful audience analysis" (p. 8). There are no universal standards for appropriateness, much less "exceptional" appropriateness. In **Competency 3**, the authors expect speakers to use "supporting material that is exceptional in quality and variety" (p. 10). There are recognized difficulties in determining the differences between "exceptional quality" and "quality" sources as well as "exceptional variety" and "variety." Unless we are willing and able to designate what exceptional quality sources are and what exceptional variety means, this competency will be difficult to apply in any communication situation.

Second, these competencies are based on generalizations from the teacher's point of view to the audience as a whole. There are tremendous problems with this generalization. This leap to criteria

application is diametrically opposed to the transactional view of communication competence. Each relationship between speaker and member of the audience is important. Competence will be determined by the understanding developed between the speaker and each listener. In assessing skills for appropriateness to audience and occasion, it is difficult to know if the skills are "appropriate" to each member of the audience. It is difficult to believe that we, as communication educators, want to place ourselves in the position of determining for an audience, whether in a classroom of 20 students or for an audience of 200, 2000, or 20000 people that a speaker is competent -- a reactional view of communication competence.

Third, these competencies are culturally narrow. Even though Morreale, et al. (1992) claim, "Each competency is assessed with respect to appropriateness for the audience and the occasion; thus cultural and other biases are avoided" (p. 3); there are cultural issues remaining when the competencies are applied in a specific communication situation. For example, **Competency 2** calls for the speaker to communicate "a thesis/specific purpose that is exceptionally clear and identifiable" (Morreale et al., 1992, p. 9). This is a culturally biased, Western model of speech development. In addition, it does not account for the use of the Motivated Sequence (where the speaker's specific purpose is revealed after the Need Step) or climactic or unfolding speech organization patterns. Another example is evident in **Competency 7**, which calls for "exceptional articulation, pronunciation, and grammar" (p. 14). The problem with this competency is clear. Obvious problems arise for English-as-a-Second Language students. These students have different articulation, pronunciation, and grammar practices. If we apply our Western (American) rules to these students' speeches, they will have difficulties meeting the standards for exceptional performance in these three categories from **The Competent Speaker** form. The problems with this competency are not only intercultural in nature, there are problems within communication classes at U.S. colleges and universities, too. For example, does a person with a Southern or New York accent have to change if talking to a Midwestern audience? Does a person with a Midwestern accent have to change

when talking to a Southern audience? Finally, in **Competency 8**, which calls for speakers to use "exceptional posture, gestures, bodily movements, facial expressions, eye contact, and use of dress" (p. 15). In some cultures, eye contact is inappropriate. In some cultures, some common American gestures are offensive. There are many different views of appropriate dress (Molloy, 1975 & 1977).

Conclusion

The transactional approach to communication competence requires that our discipline escape from the pedagogical trap of professing to teach people to be competent communicators. At best, we can teach a few specific communication skills. We can demonstrate students' abilities to perform these skills, and we can demonstrate improvement in their performance as a result of a basic communication course. We cannot, and should not, claim that we have created competent or incompetent communicators. The skills and knowledge taught in the basic course do not guarantee goal attainment nor are they necessarily applicable to non-classroom cultures and situations. Indeed, many of the skills taught in the basic course are inapplicable, inappropriate, and even unnecessary to many relationships and contexts.

The basic course barely scratches the surface of the knowledge necessary to understand the intricacies of human communication. By necessity, the basic course can examine only a minute number of contexts and situations. Evaluation of students' communication abilities are based on a few minutes of observation as they perform arbitrary assignments in an artificial environment. That is very little on which to base an assessment that the student is a competent communicator.

What we can, and should, profess to teach is a knowledge base which can help students make informed analysis and judgments about their past, present, and future communication interactions. We can, and should, teach skills that students can use in a variety of communication contexts. We can, and

should, discuss and demonstrate communication strategies that might be helpful in future interactions. In essence, the basic course can, and should, create an awareness of the processes of communication and development of a repertoire of communication skills and strategies that increase the students' chances of creating competent communication with others.

Communication competence is a judgment made by the participants in a specific communication transaction. It is neither a characteristic of an individual communicator nor a simple aggregate of observable communication behaviors. To label a student as a competent or incompetent communicator is a misrepresentation of the tenets of transactional communication. The basic communication course should focus on increasing students' proficiency in communication skills, improving students' ability to make informed analyses of communication situations, and enhancing students' capability to adapt to diverse communication contexts. Let's get out of the business of proclaiming a student as competent or incompetent based on a few weeks of lessons and a limited number of performances in an artificial environment.

We believe there is a need to question our assumptions about how to teach communication and assess communication competence in the classroom. Artificial criteria included in evaluation forms used in courses to assess students' communication performances fail to reflect what we know about communication as a transaction **and** what we know about communication competence.

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